

**Authorship and self-reflexivity in Taiwan cinema:  
Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang**

**Teréz Vincze, PhD  
Department of Film Studies  
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest**

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The outline of the presentation:

1. What I mean when I speak about (self-)reflexivity?
2. What is the relationship between self-reflexivity and authorship?
3. How does this relate to the question of global vs. local authorship?
4. What can be said about Hou and Tsai from this perspective?

**1. What I mean when I speak about (self-)reflexivity?**

It can be said that usually many, and quite different phenomena are mentioned in relation to define filmic reflexion or self-reflexion. Most often these phrases refer to some kind of intra- or intertextuality present in films. For example, the appearance of Francois Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* in the film *What Time is it There?* by Tsai Ming-liang – is an eminent example of intertextuality. And the many motifs/characters/actors that are repeatedly present in Tsai Ming-liang's films, create a dense net of intratextuality.

Another structure, that is often interpreted as reflexivity in film, is the depiction of a creative process on the narrative level that can be read as an allegory of film making. A famous example would be Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* where the making, and especially the processing and enlarging of photographs can be read as an allegory of film making.

Still another possibility is to consider the (excessive) use of certain stylistic features as reflexivity – as a reflection on the medium of film. In this sense, it could be said, that the films themselves do film theory - the director not only convey a story, and not only creates a systematic and sophisticated style, but the narrative structure of the film and its stylistic tools can be read as comments and reflections on the possibilities of the filmic medium, and

the creator of the film can be interpreted as a film theoretician who makes comments about the ontological conditions of the medium of film.

What I mean, when I speak about self-reflexivity, is connected to this last form – it implies the film director as an agent who makes comments about the possibilities and constraints of filmmaking, and about the medium of film, and does this through his or her artwork.

In a wider sense, I call reflexivity when the film contains reflexions about what cinema and film making are. It can be allegorical, like in *Blow-Up*, or a direct comment through the representation of film making in the diegesis.

Although, in the strict sense, I call a film self-reflexive when the film in question reflects on its own existence as a film, being constructed as a film. Self-reflexion in this sense includes signs or procedures that lay bare the artificial nature of the artefact<sup>1</sup>. One of the prototypes of such films, and probably the most emblematic European modernist self-reflexive film is Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*.

As András Bálint Kovács argues: "*Reflexivity creates a hole (...) in the texture of the fiction through which the viewer is directly connected to the aesthetic apparatus of the fiction. The ultimate goal of reflexive procedures is to create a direct discursive relationship between the author and the audience, whereby the auteur may say something not only according to the aesthetic rules of a genre but also about the rules themselves according to which the work of art in question was made.*" (p. 225.)

That leads to the second point of my presentation:

## **2. What is the relationship between self-reflexivity and authorship?**

Self-reflexive films can be interpreted as thoughts about the medium of the moving image, and the concept and limitations of narrative film. In this sense, the authors practice film theory through their work, make comments about film making, about the position of being a film maker.

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<sup>1</sup> Kovács, András Bálint: *Screening Modernism. European Art Cinema, 1950–1980*. Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007. Chapter 12: Critical Reflexivity or the Birth of the Auteur. pp. 217–237. loc. cit. p. 224.

And the reflexivity developed by post-war modernist cinema is not simply a revelation of the fictional illusion. It also contains a moral critique of reality by means of revealing the fictional illusion. This post-war era reflexivity *"was fundamentally based on the (...) critical conception of the film auteur as the ultimate master and critic of cinematic forms and simultaneously of reality. When reflexivity is understood as the auteur's reflection on the medium it becomes critical reflection. It is with the idea that the film has an individual auteur who has his own personal relationship to reality and to the medium that critical reflection appears in the cinema."* (p. 224.)

In sum, the interrelation of cinematic self-reflexivity and the birth of the auteur in film theory is one of the defining features of modernism, this constellation gave birth to critical reflexivity.

### **3. How does this relate to the question of global vs. local?**

Theoretical discussions of the auteur's role in art during the 1990s, started focusing attention on repositioning this figure as a historically and culturally determined function and creating a new non-universal concept of authorial subjectivity. As it has been stated by Seán Burke<sup>2</sup> concerning the need for situated authorial subjectivity in contemporary literature, the author could regain its power in the interpretation as a figure that connects his text to its historical, geographical, political and cultural context.

At the same time, in the 1990s, reflexivity was already a widely used global convention in film, it has become especially popular following the first wave of post-war European modernist reflexive works, and it had conquered popular cinema, and – in a non-critical version –, reflexivity also has become a defining feature of post-modern film.

Since reflexivity in its many forms often includes references to film history and the evocation of famous films – reflexivity in general helps to make local films to seem familiar, guide the audience to relate to them in the context of familiar films and the familiarity of film history. In this sense, reflexivity could be understood as a tool for connecting the artistic endeavours of different cultures.

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<sup>2</sup> Burke, Seán: *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998. pp. 203-204.

#### 4. What could be said about the auteurs of Taiwan from this perspective?

As Fran Martin noted: Taiwan cinema is “*haunted by the unquiet ghosts of the European art cinemas of the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century*.”<sup>3</sup> Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang are among the many Chinese-language directors who confess to be admirers of the French New Wave. (vö: Douchet 1999, 317-18)<sup>4</sup>

Since reflexion and intertextuality are strong features of European modernist cinema, it is not surprising that the oeuvres of these directors are also rich in film history references and film quotations. But beyond this, both Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang have directed entire films those fit into the above mentioned, more strictly defined category of self-reflexivity.

#### Hou Hsiao-hsien

More about this in a moment. But before that, it is worth mentioning how the use of intertextuality played a defining role in creating Hou’s profile as an auteur starting with the film: *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983).

European cinema has a strong presence in the film – the boys go to see a European film in the cinema (it is Visconti: *Rocco and his brothers*). What is significant about this motif is that the process of remembering is connected to the experience of this European film. It is Visconti's movie that evokes the childhood memories of the main character.

References to film history and to the power of cinema are sporadically present in many of Hou Hsiao-hsien's later films as well. But what is more important from the perspective of critical reflexivity, is that Hou creates a very strong, systematic connection between the media of the photographic image and the representation of history and memory.

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<sup>3</sup> Fran Martin: The European Undead [http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/tsai\\_european\\_undead/](http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/tsai_european_undead/)

<sup>4</sup> Douchet, Jean. (1999). *French New Wave*, trans. Robert Bonnono (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1999), 56, 69.



Picture 1 and 2: The decomposed family is arranged into a tableau – *The Time to Live, The Time to Die*

He started building this motif in the film *The Time to Live, The Time to Die*. The film itself is about remembering, about the recollections of the past. The process is symbolically mediated by the use of photography. The arrival of a photographer is the first occasion when the fragmented, decomposed family is arranged into a tableau – this event provides a certain frame for their history, creates an object of recollection. This gesture is somehow repeated in the last shot of the film (Picture 3) where the boys (following grave losses – such as the death of the father, the mother and grandmother) are arranged into a photograph-like tableau.



Picture 3: The boys arranged into a tableau

Then the symbolic use of photography is fully developed in the *City of Sadness*. The film has a very complex media structure that contains multiple languages, sound recording, writing, photography, theatrical staging, and together these layers represent the non-transparent nature of history.



Picture 4: The photographer is the recorder of history (*City of Sadness*, 1989)

Hou Hsiao-hsien uses the same strategy that Antonioni used in *Blow-up*, he turns the photographer into an allegory of the filmmaker. The photographer (who is unable to speak) becomes the chronicler and recorder of history. All the photographs that appear in the film have a highly symbolic meaning, all of them depict important turning points in Taiwan history.

On the first picture (Picture 5), the reopening of the family business signals rebirth and restauration after WWII. The group picture of the departing Japanese teacher and his students (Picture 6) represent the end of the Japanese colonisation after the war. And the last picture about the family of Wen-ching, the photographer (Picture 7), embodies the sadness of the past, the memory of lives destroyed by history.



Picture 5



Picture 6



Picture 7

And, the film that fits into the strict category of self-reflexive films, is *Good Men, Good Women* (1995), where the reflection on film making is intermingled with the reflection on the possibilities of recounting history by using the medium of film. It is again a complex pastiche of different media (private diary, copies and excerpts from that diary, photography, theatre performance), and it has a film-within-a-film structure.

The usual markers of reflexivity are ubiquitous in the film: Ozu Yasujiro's *Late Spring* is visible on the screen in the apartment of the actress at the beginning of the film (Picture 8); the use of the mirror in the love making scene (Picture 9) emphasizes the "mirroring" relationship between the historical past and present, between the personal trauma of the actress and the trauma of the woman she plays in the film that is being shot in the diegesis, and between private story and national history.



Picture 8



Picture 9

The strongest reflexive gesture, that makes this work a truly self-reflexive piece is performed through the use of colour. The film that we are watching is distinguished from the film-within-the-film through the use of colour, the former is in colour, the latter is in black and



white. At the end, the black and white film-within-a-film starts turning into colour (Picture 10 and 11), and the first scene of the film that was in black and white, is repeated in a colour version at the very end (Picture 12 and 13). As the originally black and white historical film-within-a-film gradually turns into colour and becomes the film that we have been watching – *Good Men, Good Women* becomes a Moebius strip, that seamlessly merges history into fiction, fiction into history. And at the same time, emphasizes the close bond between past and present.



Picture 10 and 11: Black and white turns into colour in a continuous shot without editing



Picture 12: The first scene of the film

Picture 13: The last scene of the film

### **Tsai Ming-liang**

The reflexivity, and especially the intertextuality of Tsai Ming-liang's films has been discussed widely. For example, Lim Song-Hwee interpreted Tsai's authorship on the basis of intra- and intertextuality, and defined it as a case of queer authorship.

Direct representations of film making are also present in his oeuvre, and all of them are telling examples. In his third film, *The River* (1996) the root of all problems is filmmaking –



the main character, played by Tsai's permanent lead actor and alter ego, Lee Kang-sheng, helps a film director (played by Ann Hui) to shoot a scene in Taipei. Lee has to play the role of a dead body floating in the dirty river. Following this incident, he develops a mysterious and incurable neck pain, that he is unable to get rid of throughout the film.

Later, in the film *Wayward Cloud*, we encounter Lee Kang-sheng as a porn actor – this time it is not Lee who is acting dead, but his partner who sometimes completely passes out during shooting, so it seems that Lee makes sex with a dead body.

And by *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003), Tsai devotes a whole film to the love, mystery and decline of traditional cinema, and transforms Lee Kang-sheng into a mysterious, absent projectionist who only appears after the last screening is over in the old movie theatre. Incurable illness, pornography, and a ghostly puppet master of the cinematic apparatus<sup>5</sup> – these are the metaphors of film making in Tsai's works.

In 2009 Tsai has made a truly self-reflexive film. *Visage* is about film making, a reflection on creating film art. It has a very direct connection to classic, modernist self-reflexivity. This was Tsai's 9th feature film, we could say it is his own *8 and a half* – and evokes Fellini's movie.

The film was commissioned by the Louvre Museum, and was imagined as a film adaptation of the museum's collection. *Visage*, in many ways, is a summary of the artistic characteristics of Tsai. The director in the film is played again by Lee Kang-sheng. There are two memorable, lengthy scenes when the director can be seen in action as he is doing the directing itself. In the first, he gives instructions in order to remove the make-up of an actress of the film, and orders to use ice in order to make her skin look more transparent. He is clearly obsessing about the body, about the creation of the vision of the body. In the other scene, Lee has a strange conversation with Jean-Pierre Leaud, that contains the pure listing of the names of famous directors instead of a conversation.

Film making and directing is also represented in *Visage* as an aimless wandering in a labyrinth of mirrors. And Tsai's constant thematic feature – the presence of ghosts and the act of haunting is also included into the definition of film directing. In *Visage* the ghost motif becomes central, in the diegesis the director's mother dies during shooting, so the film making becomes a process of evoking ghosts – the ghost of the mother and also the ghost of Francois Truffaut is present. Death, but more importantly, mourning is also a recurring motif

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<sup>5</sup> Betz, Mark. (2006). The cinema of Tsai Ming-liang: A modernist genealogy. *Reading Chinese Transnationalisms: Society, Literature, Film*, 1.

of Tsai's work. *Visage* reflexive structure contains this as well: towards the end of the film, Lee Kang-sheng, the director is symbolically murdered by one of his imaginary characters. Death of the auteur, we might say.

But in the last shot of the film (Picture 14), the auteur is resurrected – in a true self-reflexive manner – we see the fictional and the real director (Lee Kang-sheng and Tsai Ming-liang) on the screen.



Picture 14: Tsai Ming-liang and Lee Kang-sheng in the last shot of the film

The story about film making in *Visage*, is a story about Tsai Ming-liang, a collection of reflections on his usual motifs, his artistic practices, and stylistic fingerprints. It even predicts the future. After *Visage* Tsai started to concentrate more and more on non-cinematic, and extended cinema projects. Since 2013, when – after his last feature film, *Stray Dogs* – he declared to give up feature film making, he has been spending more and more time outside cinema, often in museums – curating exhibitions, installing his short films in galleries, and directing stage performances.

These self-reflexive films by Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang provide a condensed picture about these two, very different auteur figures. Hou's conscious, critical use of different visual media reflects the problems of the mediated nature of collective remembering, and the problems of recounting history, and in this sense, he seems to have a quality that could be labelled as local or Taiwanese *auteur*ship, as his work is embedded in local history. Tsai Ming-liang's reflexivity on the other side, seems to be operating on a more

abstract, and at the same time, more personal level, referring to his persona as defined by the diasporic experiences and queer sensibilities.

These two different modes of formulating and reflecting upon authorship, exemplify the different ways how situated authorship could be understood as a structure defined by historical circumstances and personal experiences.

One of the reasons why the above discussed phenomena worth to be scrutinized is that it might help us to understand more what does it mean to be a global auteur, or a local auteur in the age of a globalized, festival oriented art cinema culture.